

Commissioned Ministry

Commissioned ministry is a form of ministry in the United Church of Christ recognizing lay persons who have been called by God to perform a specific church-related ministry. It is a ministry requiring a special body of knowledge and skills, such as Christian education, church administration, church music, parish work, missionary work, and conference and denominational staff work. In the United Church of Christ, commissioned ministry is carried out on behalf of a local church, association, conference or other church-related agency. Authorizations for commissioned ministry are granted by an association.

History and Background

The church has always had reasons to have tasks done on its behalf. It has commissioned people to take on the tasks. The act of commissioning first came to prevalence in the church as the rite that set persons apart and sent them out as foreign missionaries. The Congregational mission board was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. They commissioned, or “sent out,” people who were given the “authority to act for, or in behalf and in place of, them.” For the “commissionaries,” their ministry was done on behalf of, and with the blessing of, many others who could not go themselves but whose gifts and prayers went with them.

The standing and recognition of commissioning can also be traced to the 1929 constitution and bylaws of the Evangelical Synod of North America. It invited commissioning for “all those lay workers, men and women, who are engaged in any of the following tasks: teachers of parochial schools, deacons, lay missionaries, directors of religious education, parish workers or pastors' assistants, or workers in any other department of the church that now is or later may be recognized by the Synod.” In 1932 **The Evangelical Year Book** listed 50 commissioned workers.

The constitution and bylaws of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1934 defined a commissioned worker as “a member of the church who is called, trained and consecrated for specific full-time service in the church.” This position was incorporated into the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ. In 1983-84, amendments to the Constitution and Bylaws recognized three forms of ministry requiring ecclesiastical authorization in the United Church of Christ—ordained, commissioned and licensed ministry. While replacing the category of commissioned worker, commissioned minister continues this form of ministry but establishes a more comprehensive set of requirements and standards for it. Persons are commissioned “to a specific church-related ministry” and

not to commissioned ministry in general.

As did our forbears, the United Church of Christ values a learned ministry. Accordingly, the UCC usually expects commissioned ministers to have a college degree and basic knowledge of the Bible; theology; church history; and UCC history, polity and practice. In addition, a commissioned minister must meet the set of educational qualifications and abilities required for their chosen specific church-related ministry.

Common Practices

Commissioning once was recognition for a life-long commitment. Now people are commissioned to a particular church-related ministry that calls for their having special education preparing them for their tasks and needing or desiring authorization on the part of the denomination. Sometimes a person feels particularly called to ministry in Christian education, often in a local church or conference. Others find their administrative job at a church to be something that is a response to a call of God. There are a variety of ways people serve in church-related ministry that involve different functions from ordained ministry, and may require different education. The church, through the local association, may want to recognize this call and their commitment. Commissioned ministry is a way to do that, to interpret the work and its meaning,

and to establish a formal relationship of support and accountability.

As long as commissioned ministers have a recognized call to a church-related ministry, they are listed on the rolls of the association and have voting membership in the association. When a commissioned minister no longer serves a church-related calling body, she or he resigns the commission or applies to the association for a leave of absence. All authorizations for commissioned ministry are subject to periodic review by the association.

Skills and Attributes Needed

The Manual on Ministry: Perspectives and Procedures for Ecclesiastical Authorization of Ministry lists a series of criteria for commissioned ministry. They include a general liberal arts education, basic knowledge about the Bible, theology, church history and United Church of Christ history, polity and practice; basic skills in working with persons and groups, in administration, planning, organizing, etc.; and mastery of the theory and practice in the specific church-related field in which commissioning is sought.

Among the skills, faith affirmations, and personal qualities required of a candidate for commissioning are:

- Sense of responsibility.
- Ability to communicate.

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- Commitment to the mission of the church.
- Commitment to service in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.
- Open, affirming style.
- A sense of having been called by God and the church to commissioned ministry.

Requirements and the Process for Becoming Commissioned

Procedures and perspectives for commissioned ministry are outlined in the **Manual on Ministry** for use by association committees on the ministry. (Order it, or the excerpt on Commissioned Ministry from United Church of Christ Resources, toll-free, 800-537-3394 or find it on the web at www.ucc.org/ministers/manual.) The manual describes responsibilities of: 1) the candidate for commissioned ministry, 2) the candidate's local church, 3) the association or conference and 4) the calling body, (if other than the local church).

A candidate for commissioned ministry asks the official board of his or her church to recommend to the association committee on the ministry that the candidate be commissioned. If the board decides to proceed following review of documentation and interview with the person, the local church sends a letter of

recommendation to the association with the following documentation, some of which it secures from the candidate:

- A letter of application from the candidate, including the specific type of church-related ministry for which the person desires to be commissioned.
- A letter verifying the person's membership in the local church and the length of time the person has been a member of the United Church of Christ.
- Three letters of reference, including one from the pastor of the local church.
- Background material, including the person's life pilgrimage, understanding of call and formal education.
- A description of the process used by the local church to interview and recommend the person.

If the association committee on the ministry determines that the ministry for which commissioning is requested is one for which authorization is appropriate, it proceeds to interview the person and may appoint an advisor to assist the candidate through a program of preparation, including any needed education and training. After completing the program, the person provides to the association committee on the ministry:

- A report on the preparation, including education and training completed.
- A three-part commissioning paper by the candidate dealing with the person's theological perspective and grasp of the historic Christian faith; understanding of the history, theological roots, polity and practice of the United Church of Christ; and the person's faith pilgrimage and understanding of ministry.
- Verification of membership and participation in a local church of the United Church of Christ.
- Certification of educational attainment, including a bachelor's degree or its equivalent; documentation of specialized education and training; and documentation of ability, skills and knowledge for the specific type of church-related ministry for which the candidate is preparing, or which they are performing.
- At least four letters of reference, including one from someone closely involved with the person's education and one from the candidate's advisor.
- A Ministerial Profile, prepared by the candidate and provided by Parish Life and Leadership.
- A statement of where the candidate is in the process of seeking a call.

The candidate meets with the association committee on the ministry

to be examined. The commissioning examination determines the candidate's Christian faith; character; ability to do the work expected; education and training; knowledge of the history, polity and practices of the United Church of Christ; personal qualities; and preparation and fitness for the call the person is considering or the type of ministry the person is seeking. The committee decides whether to recommend commissioning to the association. If the committee is satisfied that the person meets the requirements for commissioning, it recommends the person to the association for approval and authorization for commissioning. The association committee on the ministry then arranges for an ecclesiastical council and plans with the candidate how the candidate's commissioning paper will be shared with the delegates to the ecclesiastical council. If commissioning is approved following the ecclesiastical council's examination of the candidate, the association instructs its committee on the ministry to proceed with plans for the commissioning. The association, candidate, local church, and other calling body, if any, participate in planning the commissioning service.

In the commissioning service, the candidate makes a commitment to serve the church, share the gospel, and perform the duties of his or her commissioned ministry. Then by prayer and declaration, the person is commissioned.

Issues Facing the Church

- Often people feel their ministries are less important if they are not seminary trained and ordained.
How does commissioned ministry address this concern?
- People are not always clear about who should be commissioned.
What are the criteria to determine when it is appropriate to be commissioned for a church-related service?
- While commissioned ministry is a form of ministry requiring ecclesiastical authorization, other ministries in which laypersons are engaged do not require such authorization. How can we affirm the ministry of all people?

Questions

- What is commissioned ministry?
- How can you find out more about the way your association makes decisions on commissioning?
- What is required to become a commissioned minister?
- What is the role of the association in commissioning? What is the role of the local church?